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# EDWARD THOMAS

BY LOUIS UNTERMAYER

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Two years ago, Edward Thomas was unknown outside of England, and known there only by a small group who understood his sharp and unflinching honesty. Upon his death, his work suddenly took on a heroic significance. Those who for years had neglected everything he wrote but his pungent criticism, began to appraise and praise Thomas as a national poet. No one would have scorned most of the exaggerations more than Thomas himself; he would doubtless have resented even so mild and misleading a characterization by Edward Garnett, who spoke of his "Celtic vision" as "an abiding example of the richness of our poet's inheritance."

How specious such a summary is, may be seen after the perusal of even a few pages of the edition of his recently published *Poems*. For Thomas' verse (as well as his "Celtic vision") owes less to his inheritance than it does to that of another poet—and, by a rather ironic twist, to an American poet. The genius, the influence, the inflection, even the idiom, of Robert Frost can be found in almost all of these English pages. The book itself, with its logical dedication, is a tribute to Frost the person as much as Frost the poet. And this debt is acknowledged in a dozen places; it is even revealed in the fly-leaf with its brief legend, *Other Books by Edward Thomas*. There is a list of over twenty careful volumes, including such titles as *Beautiful Wales*, *The Woodland Life*, *Oxford*, *Norse Tales*, *A. C. Swinburne*, *Marlborough*, *The Icknield Way*—travel-books, holiday books, illustrated gift-books, biographies, pot-boilers.

Hating his hack-work, yet unable to get free of it, putting most of his creative energy into uncreative labor, he had so repressed his ability that he had grown doubtful concerning his own power; it needed something altogether foreign to

bring out what was native in him. So when Frost visited England in 1912 and for the greater part of a year became Thomas' intimate, Thomas, drinking the same poetic brew as his transatlantic associate, became intoxicated with what he had too long denied himself. Like Frost, he loved the *minutiae* of existence, the quaint and casual turns of ordinary life, the wealth of poetry in things too common to be commonly regarded as "poetic." But, unlike Frost, he was only beginning to express these things. It was a late maturing at an early middle age. What his verse lacked in vivacity it more than made up in an intense and even solemn regard for earth. The poems are full of a slow, sad contemplation of beauty and a reflection of its ultimate futility. It is not disillusion exactly; it is rather an absence of illusion. He has caught not merely "the magic of the English countryside," but the great charm of scenes so potent in their actual colors that they need no magic to give them glamor. In this he is again like his American model, and it would be pleasant to record that he has spoken for Old England what Frost has said for New England. But the voice lacks a full-throated utterance; it has the sound of something far off and yet familiar, something that might be mistaken for an echo. Turn, for instance, to the closely-observed *Fifty Faggots*:

There they stand, on their ends, the fifty faggots  
 That once were underwood of hazel and ash  
 In Jenny Pinks's Copse. Now, by the hedge  
 Close packed, they make a thicket fancy alone  
 Can creep through with the mouse and wren. Next Spring  
 A blackbird or a robin will nest there,  
 Accustomed to them, thinking they will remain  
 Whatever is for ever to a bird:  
 This Spring it is too late; the swift has come.  
 'Twas a hot day for carrying them up:  
 Better they will never warm me, though they must  
 Light several Winters' fires. Before they are done  
 The war will have ended, many other things  
 Have ended, maybe, that I can no more  
 Foresee or more control than robin and wren.

It is not only in this sort of musing that one is reminded of Frost; the turns of speech no less than the turns of thought seem like fragments from *Mountain Interval*. Even the accent is Frost's. It does not need the memory of the first lyric in *The Hill Wife* to recall the idiom. Or examine that exquisite and quiet painting, half-landscape, half-lyric, *As*

*the Team's Head-Brass*, with its characteristically Frostian dialogue:

"When will they take it away?"  
 "When the war's over." So the talk began—  
 One minute and an interval of ten,  
 A minute more and the same interval.  
 "Have you been out?" "No." "And don't want to, perhaps?"  
 "If I could only come back again, I should.  
 I could spare an arm. I shouldn't want to lose  
 A leg. If I should lose my head, why, so,  
 I should want nothing more. . . . Have many gone  
 From here?" "Yes." "Many lost?" "Yes: a good few.  
 Only two teams work on the farm this year.  
 One of my mates is dead. The second day  
 In France they killed him. It was back in March,  
 The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if  
 He had stayed here we should have moved the tree."

Elsewhere the influence is more fugitive and fragmentary. In such fine poems as *The Sign Post*, *Tears*, *Lob*, *The Glory*, *Tall Nettles*, *The Long Small Room*, it is noticeable only in occasional phrases and a certain roundabout soliloquizing in an aftermath of emotions. But always the love of earth shines quietly through his lines. It is an unwavering affection, even though it is joy without buoyancy; a fantasy that cannot keep from being wistful. Witness, for instance, *Tall Nettles*:

Tall nettles cover up, as they have done  
 These many springs, the rusty harrow, the plough  
 Long worn out, and the roller made of stone:  
 Only the elm butt tops the nettles now.

This corner of the farmyard I like most:  
 As well as any bloom upon a flower.  
 I like the dust on the nettles, never lost  
 Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.

This natural and almost abject reverence for the soil is his authentic gift. In *Haymaking* it reaches the perfection of pictorial art; a picture of three squat oaks, a few farm laborers, a white house at the foot of a great tree:

Under the heavens that know not what years be  
 The men, the beasts, the trees, the implements  
 Uttered even what they will in times far hence—  
 All of us gone out of the reach of change—  
 Immortal in a picture of an old grange.

Thomas was killed at Arras two years ago, fighting not merely for England, but for the English country-side which he loved in that queer blend of brusqueness and passion. He loved it with a fidelity that was exceeded only by its gravity and truth; an affection that dwelt upon things as unglorified as the unfreezing of "the rock-like mud," the opening of a long swede pile, a child's path, a list of tiny villages, birds' nests uncovered by the autumn wind, dusty nettles. It is not strange that the martial notes in this volume are few; no man cared less to make capital of his patriotism, or even of his emotions, than Thomas. For instance, the opening poem, *The Trumpet*, has none of the bluster or braggadocio that takes the place of patriotism in so much war-verse. It has, instead of glib battle-cries and loud heroics, a calm acceptance, an almost glad acknowledgment of the inevitability of conflict. Thomas was not intrigued by the slogans and "new causes" that came so easily to the lips of the verse-writers. He sang half-mournfully, half-ecstatically:

Forget men, everything  
On this earth newborn,  
Except that it is lovelier  
Than any mysteries.  
Open your eyes to the air  
That has washed the eyes of the stars  
Through all the dewy night:  
Up with the light,  
To the old wars;  
Arise, arise!

"To the old wars"—that phrase explains Thomas' attitude not only as a soldier but as a poet. Even the last poem in the volume is, for all its national pride, a celebration of nothing more chauvinistic than English words.

These random quotations illustrate what is most typical in Thomas' work. They do not, however, show the blend of quiet fantasy and quieter fact that is his rarer but no less authentic talent.

Never a great poet, he will undoubtedly go down as one of England's lesser singers, but also as one of her greatest though possibly quietest and most reticent lovers.

LOUIS UNTERMAYER.